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ABSTRACT

A study examined the reading practices of reviews and editors of scholarly journals and their attitudes about their roles in the editorial process. Two-hundred thirty-seven reviewers (for a return rate of 50%) and 8 editors (for a return rate of 57%) of 14 journals (representative of those currently publishing articles in composition and representative aspects of the discipline) responded to two different questionnaires including closed- and open-ended questions. Results indicated that: (1) the most experienced and the least experienced reviewers expected a finished product, not a work in progress; (2) more experienced reviewers are almost always judging and critical in their editorial role as compared to less experienced readers; (3) when making decisions about submissions, one-third of reviewers who see their role as that of an arbiter feel more accountable to the editor, while nearly 53% of those who feel least accountable to the editor describe their own editorial role as that of a collaborator; (4) the more journals a reviewer reviews for, the greater the importance the reviewer gives to "contribution to the field" as a criterion for publication; (5) the more experienced a reviewer, the more likely he or she has done research on teacher response to student writing; and (6) those reviewers who have done research on teacher response to student writing were twice as likely as those who were familiar with such research to report that their research affected them considerably when reviewing submissions. (A profile of respondents and a list of significant findings are attached.) (RS)

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Reading Practices of Reviewers and Editors

My research on editorial review as a context for response to writing attempts to describe the reading practices of reviewers and editors and their attitudes about their roles in the editorial process. Using two different questionnaires, I surveyed the reviewers and editors of fourteen journals, representative of those currently publishing articles in composition and representative of diverse aspects of the discipline--half affiliated with professional organizations and half independent, some more prestigious than others, some specialized, some not. Because many of the reviewers surveyed may review for journals in addition to the fourteen selected, the sample may represent the attitudes of reviewers of more than the selected journals. The anonymous questionnaire designed for reviewers posed twenty-five closed- and ten open-ended questions about attitudes and expectations they bring to their readings: for example, how they understand their role in authorizing the professional discourse of our field, how their expectations differ for student and professional writing, how revision figures into their judgment of professional writing, how familiar they are with research on response to student writing, how collaborative and dialogic they consider the review process to

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be. Two experts in survey design offered suggestions on early versions of the surveys; an editor, two reviewers, and two social scientists tested them informally.[1] Two mailings to reviewers within three months yielded two hundred and thirty-seven replies for a return rate of 50%.[2]

The questionnaire designed for editors consisted of nine open-ended questions about their editorial decision-making processes: how they handle submissions and re-submissions, how they select and retain reviewers, how they communicate with reviewers and with writers about reviewers' recommendations. Eight editors replied for a return rate of 57%. The acceptance rates of their journals ranged widely from 7% to 35%. Initially, I had thought these two surveys might capture the "ethos" of reviewers and editors. However, while the data describes their reading practices and attitudes toward their roles, the ethos of editors and reviewers may best be understood by analyzing the texts of their letters to authors and referee reports--a task beyond the purview of this initial research on editorial review.

Writers seem to know what role editors play from their guidelines for submissions and their prefaces to individual issues of the journals they edit. We also have opportunities to hear their advice about prospective contributions during Research Networks, Think Tanks, and Consultation Hours at this conference. But, while scholars such as Elizabeth Flynn, Alan Purves, Fred Reynolds, and Barbara Tomlinson have alluded to the value that examining written reviews of their work might have for

understanding our discipline, we rarely hear how our colleagues perceive their roles as reviewers. In fact, I can cite only one instance where a reviewer discussed his or her role in print; that was in a series of reactions to the use of anonymous reviews in the "Voices in the Parlor" manuscript with which Rhetoric Review began its Burkean Parlor (1989). Because we need to hear how reviewers perceive their role and the effects it has on their relationships to writers and editors, this report focuses on the data that 237 reviewers supplied. The data from the survey of editors will be used to test and supplement reviewers' responses.

Social scientists observe that respondents frequently take issue with the form and content of a survey, and reviewers for journals in composition proved no exception. Conducting the survey of reviewers was like sending out a manuscript for review with two notable exceptions: the survey was not a blind submission and hundreds of reviewers instead of the usual two or three might let me know what they thought of it. Among the responses I received, two are especially memorable. The first response I received was not a completed survey but an irate, anonymous message left on my answering machine: a reviewer "contest[ed] the language in the questionnaire" he had received and demanded "an apology to the profession" (11/22/91). Soon after, I received a collegial letter from a reviewer who offered to help with my research by sharing copies of referee reports he had written. About 20% of the respondents tended to resist the questionnaire format to describe the complex activities that go

into reviewing, and they annotated their forms with comments and questions. They were hesitant to fit themselves into categories, to have their reading practices described by someone else's words. They hedged when asked for numbers and percentages of articles rejected and accepted, often noting in the blank spaces of the survey that their answers were guesses because they either didn't keep records or couldn't remember without looking it up. Some warned me not to generalize too broadly from the data. About half of this group of respondents objected to some specific aspect of the survey: from timing, length, and method of selection of respondents to criticisms of items as being ambiguous, loaded, or "difficult" because the "answers didn't fit my experience." Not every scenario can be accounted for in any survey, but the respondents' annotations confirmed what I knew from having designed the questionnaire: competing terminologies in our field make it difficult to describe response styles and attitudes in ways that most of us can agree on. Although about 80% of the respondents either commented favorably on the project or completed the questionnaire without comment, I have tried to heed the cautions that some of the respondents took time to issue as I analyze the complex role-relationships involved in blind review for refereed journals.

This study has generated a wealth of data, for which I am grateful to the respondents. I'll be able to share only some highlights with you today. The handout gives a profile of reviewers who responded and lists some significant findings. But

since numbers tell only part of the story, I'll let the words of reviewers and editors gloss and complicate the statistics as much as that is possible, given that they were constrained and prompted by the items on the surveys. In their responses to almost every question, reviewers present themselves as conscious of the conflict between their role as gatekeeper for journal and field and their role as colleague to the authors of the manuscripts they read.

Respondents agreed on three interrelated motives for being a reviewer. Most important to them was the opportunity to see interesting new work in the making before other readers do: what one reviewer called "previews of coming attractions." Others noted that "Readers of journals get to read only what the editor decides to publish." Reviewer-readers, on the other hand, have "The opportunity to see what a whole range of people are working on that doesn't get in print." One wrote: "I get to read lots of interesting material, even though much of it isn't ready for publication. Since I don't live in a graduate-school environment, that's a big plus." A second motive to review submissions was the opportunity to collaborate on interesting work in progress: in the words of one respondent, "the chance to help interesting research 'germs' come to fruition." Another concurs about how rewarding it is "when I see pieces in print that have made use of my responses." Collaborating for many reviewers also means "serv[ing] as [a] mentor to younger scholars." One claims that the kind of "work with graduate

students as they grow and develop as researchers and scholars . . . simply extends into reviewing." Another appreciates the opportunity "to make suggestions on borderline but interesting manuscripts that result in publishable articles, particularly if I sense that the author is fairly new to the business." Third in importance as a motive for reviewing, is serving the field as gatekeepers, "playing an important part in maintaining the quality of scholarship in the field," having "the power to influence what gets said." As one reviewer put it, "Reviewing can be tedious, time consuming, thankless, nonrewarding. But it is one of the best opportunities to shape and nurture the field of composition studies. It's a very important, and ultimately satisfying job, on those grounds." Another reviewer sums up these three motives: "I think I have the experience necessary to know when a real contribution is being made . . . I learn; the field benefits; the writer's career is enhanced." The eight editors who responded to my survey noted that they selected reviewers "whose work we admire," because of their "stature in the field," because they were nominated by a member of a professional organization and passed a screening. Both reviewers and editors acknowledge the prestige associated with the labels reader-reviewer, consulting reader, referee, and editorial board member.

As we might expect, the respondents saw disadvantages to acting as readers in the blind review process as well--all related to the time it takes to do a good job and the time it

takes away from their own research and their teaching. Reviewers resent the time they spend reading incompetent submissions that are very early drafts, material that they say should not have been submitted. Even though they claim to believe in collaborating, only 31 respondents, or 13%, claim to view submissions as works in progress. When asked if they expect a manuscript to be a "work in progress" or a "finished product," 83% expect to read the manuscript as "a finished product." For instance, one reviewer wrote: "I get really exasperated with authors whose bibliographies are incomplete (missing publication information) or who haven't carefully proofread their work before submitting it." Here is a short list of the ways reviewers described features of manuscripts that make them dislike their role: "poor writing from teachers of writing," poorly conceived manuscripts, papers full of jargon and difficult technical language, old ideas presented as new ones. "Sometimes they travel paths that are well worn," one reviewer wrote. Further, reviewers object to submissions "that reflect vast ignorance of the field . . . that ignore the work of others, that decline to acknowledge the indebtedness we all owe to one another." They also take authors to task for pieces that "don't take account of the readership of the journal": "It's like they don't even read the journal." Reviewers attribute the rate of poor submissions to a number of factors. One is certainly the fact that they wish in the words of one reviewer, that "many submissions were further along in the writing process--closer to finished than they are."

Other reviewers object to manuscripts that were "apparently not subjected to adequate review/discussion before submission," that "should probably undergo more peer review at [the] author's institution." "I'd rather read 'better' manuscripts--so that I'd not be rejecting any outright," concludes one respondent. Reviewers also dislike having to disappoint authors who have obviously worked hard by rejecting their manuscripts:

> I've sometimes been asked to review a manuscript that's already been revised once or twice. If it's still not good enough to publish, I feel like the writer has been put through a lot of work for nothing--but you can't print people just to be nice.

Another dislikes "The need, sometimes, to tell a writer (probably a novice in the field) that the work is naive or uninformed (unpublishable)." Many reviewers feel acutely, in the words of one, the "conflict of evaluator role with responder role--feeling required to make judgments while knowing that writers need supportive response to improve."

The conduit between the reviewers and the authors whose manuscripts they at once look forward to reading and are also highly critical of is, of course, the journal editor. When responding to submissions, 62%, or 149, of the respondents fill out checklists that editors provide "often" or "almost always"; 20%, or 45 reviewers, are "almost never" guided by a list of "reader's instructions." To a large extent, then, editors may communicate their expectations to reviewers about what is

publishable and what is not by means of these checklists. If a reviewer is reading for more than one journal (which 66% of these reviewers are), then they may be responding with differing criteria in mind. Reviewers are also clearly writing with two audiences in mind: they are almost evenly split on whether to defer to the editor as the primary gatekeeper or instead to direct their comments to the author, with 69% writing comments to the editor "often" or "almost always" and 77% "often" or "almost always" writing to the author.

What do reviewers expect editors to do with their comments? They believe the editor will use their comments in the context of other reviewers' comments as advice about whether to publish or not to publish. No single reviewer feels solely responsible for making the judgment, but claims to share responsibility with other reviewers and the editor. One reviewer sums up this belief: "I'd hope an editor will 1) use my comments to make an informed decision about the advisability of publishing the piece, 2) pass my comments on to the author, 3) pass my comments on to other reviewers of the manuscript, and 4) use my comments as an aerial to tune into what folks in the field are thinking." The editors who responded to my survey generally agreed that they accept the advice they solicit from their reviewers. Some editors exercise more control than others from one who screens the manuscripts before deeming them worthy to send on to his reviewers to another who considers the journal she edits a "reader's journal."

And what do editors actually do with the comments that are directed to them that the reviewer might also intend for the author? According to the eight editors who answered my questionnaire, procedures for sharing the reviewers' comments with authors vary. Some contextualize excerpts, interpret, or edit reviewers' comments for the author. One doesn't have to because reviewers write directly to the author. And at least one editor doesn't share reviewers' comments because she has "found that most authors get annoyed, offended . . . or want to waste our time re-arguing their case, since so many people in academics feel they are excellent, clear writers."

When discussing how the author might use their comments if the editor passes them along to him or her, or if they write the comments directly to the author (which the editor of at least one journal in my survey expressly asks that they do), reviewers "intend the author to take the suggestions as constructive comments on revising a piece, how to write publishable papers and do good research." Reviewers also know that how authors "use [their comments] depends on what they are and who the author is or imagines him/herself to be. That is, do they respond/can they respond to criticism/comments?" They hope, in the words of one reviewer, that the author will use their comments "to gain response from a committed colleague and regular reader of the journal to which the article has been submitted, and to use that response in deciding whether and how to revise the article." Reviewers, then, see their comments as serving two audiences:

they write comments to evaluate submissions as finished products and advise editors about publication at the same time that they write comments to instruct and collaborate with authors on works in progress. This dual role may account for the fact that elsewhere on the survey reviewers claimed to be both facilitative and critical: 67% of the respondents viewed their role "often" or "almost always" as facilitative, that is, "provid[ing] helpful feedback to the author so that he or she can produce a better piece of writing even if you recommend not to publish"; and 80% interpreted their role as "often" or "almost always" judging/critical, that is, "mak[ing] informed decisions about the quality of submissions in order to allow the best to be published and to keep out the less worthy ones."

In terms of their relationship to the writers whose careers they are making or breaking and in terms of their relationship to a community of reviewers, respondents voiced some concerns about how editors manage dialogue among the participants in the process. A case in point is what one reviewer termed a "black hole." Reviewers don't like not knowing the results of their suggestions: "I often feel I'm returning comments into a black hole--I never see effects as I do with students." Reviewers want "feedback about 1) how I'm doing 2) What other readers said 3) whether or not the article was published." One dislikes "making judgments that receive no response from the author thereby making the discourse non-dialectical": " . . . you never get to see if or how you might have helped., i.e., the process makes reviewers

rather remote." One reviewer wrote at length about the lack of dialogue in the editorial community:

> I have been a referee for three major composition journals for quite a few years, and always have the sense of working in the dark, since I don't see other referees' comments. The only time I do see other's reports is when one of my articles is refereed, and I have seen all sorts of responses to the same paper, both useful and trivial, and frequently contradictory--but that is often understandable.

Another reviewer remarked, "I review in other disciplines besides composition. Those journals seem better at sharing the results of the review with the reviewers (that is, sending copies of the other reviews and action letter). They also seem to follow up better on revisions." Of the eight editors who responded to my survey, four claimed to write and call reviewers often. Two suggested that results of any year's readings were reported and discussed at editorial board meetings. Two other editors, who do not currently communicate with reviewers about their recommendations, admitted a need to do so in the future.

When asked about blind review (not blind submission), one respondent refused to question the status quo when he wrote: "I wouldn't allow [my identity to be revealed to an author] because the guidelines for submission and review stipulate anonymity, so it would mean violating stated rules. But I never write comments that I would be afraid of linking my name to, or comments that are rude or otherwise excessive." Others agreed: if the author

knew their identity before they reviewed the submission, 28% would either refuse to review the article, or they would review it differently than if they were anonymous. Fifty-four percent reported that if an editor asked if he or she could reveal their identity to an author before they commented, they would review the manuscript the same as if they were anonymous. In the words of one representative from this group, "I stand by what I say and would be unafraid to have someone know what I thought about their work. I would welcome comments from others. After all, we are collaborating in a way, with the ultimate goal of providing something useful to the profession." As reluctant to deliver criticism as some writers are to receive it, one respondent would "allow favorable but disallow unfavorable reviews to be 'identified'," and another would not want his or her identity revealed "if the author is known for taking criticism badly."

A final set of closed- and open-ended questions asked to what extent discussions of teacher response to student writing have affected the response practices of reviewers in their editorial role. An editor commented that she had observed "a remarkable number of parallels" when she conducted a workshop comparing comments reviewers made to students with their comments to manuscript writers. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents claim to be familiar with research on teacher response to student writing; 38% noted that they had themselves conducted such research. Statistically, it was proved that those who had done research on teacher response to student writing were more likely

to transfer their knowledge to their editorial role than those who had read the research. The reviewer-respondents described the tone and direction of the comments they address to authors, invoking the language of research on writing response. For example, these reviewers try not to "appropriate the writer's text," try to give "reader-based" descriptive comments. Familiarity with research on writing response leads a reviewer to claim that "my comments are intended to shape works in progress. I begin most remarks with "When you revise . . . " Calling upon techniques of specific researchers in writing response, a respondent notes that "Nancy Sommers' observations on differences between revision and editing guide my advice to authors," another tries "to give writers a 'movie of my mind' letting them see what struck me as clear . . . or unclear . . . ," and yet another concurs that "My reading of Peter Elbow's [work] about responding to student papers seems to have subconsciously affected my style of responding to manuscripts." A clear sense of audience learned from research on writing response guides others as well. One reported, "I do not write abusive, authoritative notes to colleagues. I do need to make a judgment (up or down), but I can respond in a way that is enabling and humane." Another claims to be "<u>much</u> more conscious of my language, role, sense of self, and audience (the writer) even though we are both anonymous." Similarly, another respondent observed, "I keep in mind that the real reader for most comments is the author who has a good deal at stake in a piece, who believes it to be good and finished, and

who may respond to criticism even fair and sensitive, with dismay and anger."

Eighteen percent of the respondents noted that, despite their knowledge of research on writing response, their editorial role remains distinct from their role in the writing classroom. One reviewer speaks for this group when he declared that he did not "see a journal reader as a colleague-peer reviewer. In Peter Elbow's terms, when the writer is ready to go public the journal readers are judges not coaches. The writer's own network of colleagues must supply the coaches." Another noted that colleagues are not students: "I comment [in the writing classroom] to facilitate revision. I do not see my editorial reader role similarly." Extending the distinction to a different context, another respondent noted: "I play a different role when I help a colleague develop a manuscript/proposal--[that of] advisor, than when I review for a journal--[that of] authority."

The exploration of editorial review as a context for writing response has barely begun. How can future research move us closer to understanding its complexity? Will what we learn lead editors and reviewers to change the process of editorial review? And should it? In the words of one last reviewer, will we be "always aware that knowledge is a continuing work in progress growing dialectically and polyphonically in interaction with the voices of colleagues"?

Notes

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2 I am grateful to the secretarial staff and the chair of the English Department at Kennesaw State College for their administrative and financial support of this project. My student research assistant Stephanie Leonard helped in compiling the data.

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CCCC Panel, March 19, 1992

Editorial Review: An Unexplored Context for Writing Response

Reading Practices of Reviewers and Editors

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

N=237 Reviewers (50% return)

They review for at least 14 journals: College Composition and Communication, College English, Composition Studies/Freshman English News, Journal of Advanced Composition, Journal of Basic Writing, Journal of Teaching Writing, PRE/TEXT, Reader, Research in the Teaching of English, Rhetoric Review, Teaching English in the Two-Year College, Writing on the Edge, WPA: Writing Program Administration, Written Communication

Gender

Male	60%
Female	40%

Age

Under 40 years old	11%
40 to 55	78%
Over 55	11%

Academic Rank

Emeritus	5%
Professor	41%
Associate Professor	34%
Assistant Professor	10%
Lecturer	5%
Other	5%

Employment

Ph.D-granting university, public	52%
Ph.D-granting university, private	11%
State/regional college/university	15%
Private undergraduate college	7%
Two-year college	12%
Other	3%

Reviewing Experience

Number of years reviewing:

6 months to 2 years	14%
3 to 5 years	40%
6 to 10 years	34%
Over 10 years	12%

Number of journals reviewed for:

1	34%
2 to 5	61%
Over 5	5%

Approximate number of mss. reviewed in the past two years:

1 to 5	18%
6 to 10	40%
10 to 15	16%
Over 15	26%

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

-> The most experienced and the least experienced reviewers expect a finished product, not a work in progress, when they receive a manuscript for review.

-> More experienced reviewers are almost always judging and critical in their editorial role as compared to less experienced readers. Only one-third of those with two years or less experience perceive themselves as almost always critical rather than facilitative in their style of responding.

-> When making decisions about submissions, one-third of those who identified their role in the process as that of an arbiter feel most accountable to the editor of the journal. Nearly 53% who feel least accountable to the editor when they review manuscripts describe their own editorial role as that of a collaborator.

-> The more journals one reviews for, the greater the importance he or she gives to "contribution to the field" as a criterion for publication.

-> The more judging and critical a reviewer feels his or her role to be, the greater importance the reviewer gives to "contribution to the field" as a criterion for publication.

-> The relative importance of the "appropriate form for a particular journal" as a criterion for publication decreases with the number of journals one reviews for.

-> Reviewers who have conducted research on teacher response to student writing have used their research findings considerably in the writing classroom.

-> The more experienced a reviewer, the more likely he or she has done research on teacher response to student writing. Those who reported having done such research include 38.7% of those with fewer than two years experience, 48.1% of those with six to ten years experience, and a majority--57.7%--with more than ten years experience as reviewers.

-> Those reviewers who have done research on teacher response to student writing are twice as likely as those who are familiar with such research to report that their research has affected them considerably when reviewing submissions.